
TO PORTFOLIO OR NOT TO PORTFOLIO HELPFUL OR HYPED?

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Abstract. Portfolios have received mixed but primarily positive reviews in colleges and universities. The portfolio offers a tool of authentic assessment as well as an opportunity for students to be reflective practitioners. Portfolio implementation and evaluation has become a feature of many university departments. The author describes different approaches to portfolios, as well as the origins of and research related to portfolio use.

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The portfolio is probably the single most important reason I am resigning my position at this university. The portfolio seems like overkill, big time. I will say that once completed, the ones done well are treasured by the student teachers. However, I think their feelings are based mainly on the extraordinary amount of work that went into the preparation. I doubt if anyone has ever used a portfolio to get a job. And preparing twenty-six entries for one portfolio? Bah humbug.

This quote from an individual at my university, who supervised student teachers in the field for years

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and helped score stacks of portfolios, reflects some of the current antipathy toward portfolio development and scoring in college and university departments.

Not all commentary on portfolios is negative, however, as evidenced by the upbeat tone of Kalamazoo College (Michigan) in providing information to students on portfolios:

The Kalamazoo Portfolio is a tool designed to help you make informed decisions about your educational path. It's part journal, part goal sheet, and part educational map. It's a series of Web pages which you'll save in your e-mail account (don't worry about privacy; it's easy to lock your Portfolio). It's also a graduation requirement and part of the academic advising process. And though it may seem like extra work at first, it is a

very useful tool to help you get the most out of your Kalamazoo College education. (Biziorek 2003)

Portfolios have become a fixture in higher education institutions across wide variety of academic fields. They have evolved in form, type, and purpose and have a rich history in many disciplines.

Where Did Portfolios and Portfolios Come From, Anyway?

For decades, portfolios have served as evaluative tools of fine arts and creative writing departments, as students looked for ways to showcase their best work. The early roots of today's portfolios can be traced to the mid-1980s, with the work of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (1986), who served as administrators for a writing program with a written exit exam. Elbow and Belanoff, dissatisfied with the holistic scoring method used on the exam, experimented with portfolios. Their students submitted folders with writing across several genres, rather than only one. A new emphasis on process over product occurred as well.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, portfolio-based programs emerged at Purdue University, Miami University of Ohio, and the University of Michigan; the junior portfolio program at Washington State University also appeared (Beagle 2004). Portfolios were generally divided into two categories: the process portfolio or the product portfolio. Process-oriented work demonstrates the

growth of the learner over time, such as the rough to final draft of a particular piece of work. Product-oriented portfolios focus on the best work of the student, the items that represent the highest quality created (Epstein 2005). From demonstrating progress through selection of best works, the portfolio system provides new ways for students to exhibit what they have learned over time.

Since the advent of the World Wide Web in 1992, the term *ePortfolio* has been used to describe electronic portfolios, typically collections of student work captured on a Web site, CD-ROM, or DVD. *Webfolios* became the term of choice for composition studies, and the term *digital portfolios* gained widespread acceptance after 2000, as technology changes and improvements accelerated.

Helen C. Barrett (2003), the reigning guru of ePortfolios, notes that many teacher education programs are adopting electronic portfolios to meet National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) 2000 Standard #2. Assessment Systems, which mandates a comprehensive system that is aligned with program, institutional, state, and national standards, is based on performance and is developed in conjunction with the professional community. Barrett was on the faculty of the School of Education at the University of Alaska and the assessment coordinator for the International Society for Technology in Education's National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers.

Barrett warns against confusing electronic portfolios—which have multiple purposes, such as learning, assessment, and employment—with assessment management systems, which are primarily used for formative and summative assessment. The true ePortfolio is student-centered, with works selected by the student, whereas the assessment management system is institution centered, with works prescribed by the institution (Barrett 2003).

Commercial companies such as Taskstream (<http://www.taskstream.com>), Livetext (<http://college.livetext.com>), and Folio Live (<http://www.foliolive.com>) allow creation and long-term storage of electronic portfolios, projects, and documents; provide faculty access to student work, to give online feedback; and give

the school, college, or department of education a way to collect and aggregate data for program evaluation and improvement. Eager to assess the effectiveness of ePortfolios through both qualitative and quantitative research, “the REFLECT Initiative [was] a two-year study, directed by Dr. Helen Barrett and underwritten by TaskStream, assessing the impact of electronic portfolios on student learning motivation and engagement in secondary schools” (TaskStream 2005).

Showcase ePortfolios, which enable the author to control who sees the collection of selected work through passwords at a particular site, can be seen at the Web sites of Pennsylvania State University (<http://portfolio.psu.edu>), Elon University (<http://www.elon.edu/students/portfolio>), and the Knowledge Media Laboratory at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (<http://www.carnegie-foundation.org/KML>). The Minnesota State College and University system has embraced portfolios, and MIT's Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI) has championed the ePortfolio as a major learning and assessment tool within the campus's virtual community (Batson 2002). The Maryland State Department of Education (2006) has established a statewide resource on electronic portfolio production in teacher preparation programs.

Florida State University assists students in creating career ePortfolios (<http://www.career.fsu.edu/portfolio>), and “The Center for Technology in Education (CTE) at Johns Hopkins University (<http://cte.jhu.edu/epweb/>) has developed a standards-based ePortfolio for teacher education as a replacement for the paper portfolios used in the Master of Arts in Teaching program” to respond to formal standards and teacher certification requirements (Greenberg 2004, 28). The Electronic Portfolio Action Committee (EPAC) was created within the National Learning Infrastructure to “engage in the creation, use, publication, and evaluation of electronic portfolio projects and tools in higher education and beyond for teaching, learning, and assessment” (Treuer and Jensen 2003).

Gary Greenberg, executive director for information and research initiatives at Northwestern University, champions dynamic multimedia portfolio presentations

such as those created at Carnegie: “Showcase ePortfolios can also be highly professional, provocative, and intended to advance knowledge and experience in a field while bringing people together around common interests and concerns” (Greenberg 2004, 28). Greenberg goes on to describe the Folio Thinking Project at Stanford:

The Folio Thinking Project (<http://scil.stanford.edu/research/projects/folio.html>), a collaboration among the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Uppsala University, and Stanford University, is using personal learning ePortfolios to capture the artifacts and evidence of student learning and to help students use reflection to document their changing understanding. At Stanford, electronic learning portfolios (or e-folios) were used to capture formal and informal learning as students in the Class of 2002 made career decisions during their evolving four-year course of study. A new project is exploring how “folio thinking” can build engineering students' confidence in their ability to become an engineer and can thus increase the number of prospective majors who stay in engineering. (Greenberg 2004, 28)

Essentially, digital portfolios and ePortfolios have evolved from the traditional, paper variety and serve as a source for study regarding their effects on student motivation, achievement, and institutional outcomes. Several well-established resources exist on ePortfolio purposes, compilation, types, assessment, and examples, such as the American Association for Higher Education's Electronic Portfolios, Resources for Higher Education (<http://http://ctl.du.edu/portfolioclearinghouse/>); the Electronic Portfolio Consortium (<http://www.eportconsortium.org>); and Educause's National Learning Infrastructure Initiative for Electronic Portfolios (http://www.educause.edu/content.asp?page_id=5524&bhpc=1).

Portfolios: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Attitudes toward portfolios depend on stance, history, and perceived value. With the current buzz around ePortfolios versus paper portfolios and electronic portfolios versus assessment management systems, it seems an opportune time to revisit the dangers and benefits of portfolios. Stanford University's Lee Shulman, a leader in the portfolio movement, describes five dangers of portfolios:

1. “lamination”—A portfolio becomes a mere exhibition, an opportunity for self-aggrandizement, a chance to show off.
2. “heavy lifting”—Is all the hard work a portfolio demands really worth the effort?
3. “trivialization”—People document material that does not merit reflection.
4. “perversion”—Portfolio scoring systems might objectify portfolios to the point that the portfolios lose their ability to evaluate individual outcomes.
5. “misrepresentation”—Does the emphasis on best work misrepresent the candidate’s work, so as not to be a true picture of competency? (Shulman 1998 qtd. in Barrett 2003, 3–4)

Shulman also discusses five benefits in the use of portfolios:

1. Portfolios permit the tracking of longer episodes of teaching more effectively than single observations do.
2. Portfolios encourage important connections between process and product, through bridging what goes on in teaching with how it is manifested in portfolio products.
3. Portfolios institutionalize norms of collaboration, reflection, and discussion.
4. A portfolio introduces structure to the field experience and can be seen as a “portable residency.”
5. Portfolios shift the responsibility for demonstrating learning back to the student teacher, as a participant rather than an observer. (Shulman 1998 qtd. in Barrett 2003, 4)

Myriad challenges exist in portfolio management at any institution, such as storage for traditional binder-style portfolios; the choice of which rubric or assessment instrument to use; security for both paper and digital products; the evaluation process; student resistance to the bulk of work required; repetition, redundancy, or overlap of certain items and requirements; and student understanding of and compliance with portfolio procedures and deadlines.

Says the university supervisor who finally retired over portfolio problems:

I used to ask the student teaching seminar what themes they were interested in, and I would put together a packet for them, including short stories, articles, whatever I could find. Those days are pretty much over. A good

share of time now is devoted to explaining the nit-picking requirements for the portfolio. Bottom line: it breaks my heart to see so much time taken from worn-out, overworked student teachers to prepare something that very few benefited from. If they were all polled, I doubt that one in a hundred, if even that, would advise continuing this process.

A Walk on the Wild Side: The Professional Teaching Portfolio

In response, California State University–Northridge, a campus of 33,000 students just north of Los Angeles, opted for Professional Teaching Portfolios (PTPs) in 2003. With 1,700 students annually earning teaching credentials in elementary, secondary, and special education through CSU–Northridge’s College of Education, the Department of Secondary Education laid a firm foundation in procedures for and assessment of the PTP, with an emphasis on teachers as reflective practitioners.

At CSU–Northridge, the portfolio is defined for students as “a collection of artifacts that you thoughtfully select to show evidence of critical teaching knowledge, teaching abilities, and professional development” (Ericson 2004). Procedurally, traditional, binder-style PTPs at CSU–Northridge are collected at the end of the student’s final student teaching experience, when all coursework for the teacher credential has been successfully completed. Two pieces, called *artifacts*, per Teacher Performance Expectations (TPE) are required in the PTP, including examples of student work, lesson plans, extended unit or semester plans, the midterm or final student teaching evaluation, or an individual induction or “flight” plan for the road ahead in the first year of teaching. A one-page reflection, required with each artifact, asks students to address these questions:

1. What insights about your teaching or student learning have you gained?
2. How does the lesson, activity, or assignment allow you to make decisions about your teaching in the future, with increased understanding or pedagogical skill?
3. How does the artifact reflect what you value in your teaching practice?

In California, thirteen TPEs were created by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. The thirteen TPEs reflect: six domains: making subject matter comprehensible to students;

assessing student learning; engaging and supporting students in learning; planning instruction and designing learning experiences for students; creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning; and developing as a professional educator.

Students begin building their portfolios in their first foundations of education class, then add artifacts from various methods, instructional technology, literacy, and student teaching seminar courses. Artifacts are reviewed, evaluated, and graded by various instructors who are trained in the portfolio procedures.

Once the PTP is submitted for its final evaluation, two trained readers who are subject-area specialists use a prescribed rubric to assess the portfolio. Readers are composed of faculty from across the many disciplines in which the students teach, as well as those who have supervised students and conducted seminars during the student-teaching experience. Reader training consists of a one-hour session on the TPEs, PTP procedures and requirements, rubric, criteria, and reading process review; benchmarking of student samples with scoring practice; and discussion. A benchmarking session before each portfolio-scoring meeting helps to calibrate and recalibrate readers according to established standards and evaluation criteria. The CSU–Northridge rubric, developed over time with the input of faculty and supervisors, scores the portfolio across a continuum of 5 to 1, from outstanding to unsatisfactory; the readers grade it on a pass-fail basis:

A Web site also assists students with the portfolio process (http://www.csun.edu/~sch_educ/sed/ptp/index.htm), providing directions on how to prepare the portfolio, listing information on the TPEs, and posting a sample evaluation form used to score a PTP.

As CSU–Northridge and others look at using ePortfolios to replace the current paper format, the ePortfolio Clearinghouse recommends some forty-five universities as resources, as they are advancing in digital portfolio collection, storage, and sharing (http://ctl.du.edu/portfolioclearinghouse/search_portfolios.cfm). For example, the eDoc project at Iowa State University is a “multi-

year, multi-unit collaboration among different colleges at ISU [that] involves developing a campus-wide electronic portfolio system [that] uses open source electronic portfolio software” (<http://www.kzoo.edu/pfolio/archive/>). The nonproprietary, open-source software allows colleges flexibility to move in and out of the project as needed. Both undergraduate and graduate students demonstrate their academic and professional competencies to faculty and potential employers through portfolios,

subsequent impact on quality; (3) quality control over time, as students add to the portfolio throughout their coursework, which can span two years; and (4) the digitalization of the portfolio, raising questions about appropriate procedures and models that should be used.

As a result of discussions on portfolio collection and storage, the Department of Secondary Education at CSU–Northridge recognizes that challenges accompany the process of digitizing portfolios, as outlined in the Electronic Portfolio White Paper,

ing or academics, but time refocused and redefined, with the portfolio viewed as a natural complement to learning (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory 2005). Although students and portfolio scores may be resistant to them because of the workload they represent, portfolios are now widely accepted and used in hundreds of colleges and universities to evaluate student work. Despite the price of progress, portfolios are here to stay.

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ISSUES SUCH AS COST AND PRIVACY NEED TO BE EXAMINED IN THE EPORTFOLIO EXPANSION, AS MORE VENDORS OFFER THE TECHNOLOGICAL PRODUCTS TO SUPPORT DIGITAL PORTFOLIO PRODUCTION. IN SELECTING SOFTWARE, QUALITY, USER-FRIENDLY FEATURES, EASE OF SECURITY, AND APPLICABILITY OVER TIME MUST BE CONSIDERED.

as well as collaborate with peers in their scholarship.

What the PTP Results Revealed about Portfolios

Three types of credential candidates—accelerated, traditional, and intern (on-the-job candidates working on credentials while teaching)—submitted portfolios for scoring, with the highest numbers in English, mathematics, science, and social science. Thirty-eight percent received a score of 4 out of 5, and 11 percent were required to rewrite sections of their portfolios.

Sixty percent of the rewrites came from the interns, and the subject with the most rewrites was math. Over the academic year of 2003–04, with 245 portfolios scored by evaluators, the most common score on a 5-point scale was a 4, the average percentage of rewrites was 12 percent, and 87 percent of students passed the portfolio on their first attempt. About 82 percent of the PTPs were scored by one reader (Ericson 2004).

The principal portfolio issues faced at CSU–Northridge have been (1) secure storage of cumbersome, binder-style portfolios full of materials; (2) the twenty-six artifacts required, with questions about decreasing their number and the

presented by the ePortConsortium in 2003. Issues such as cost and privacy need to be examined in the ePortfolio expansion, as more vendors offer the technological products to support digital portfolio production. In selecting software, quality, user-friendly features, ease of security, and applicability over time must be considered.

Summary

From early paper formats in fine arts and creative writing departments to today’s sophisticated electronic versions, portfolios are now widespread in a variety of fields. Databases and Web sites are now devoted to collecting, categorizing, sharing, and discussing the electronic portfolio. Students can now use digital cameras, camcorders, Web cams, scanners, and file transfers to demonstrate skills that cannot be conveyed via traditional paper portfolios. A range of resources, Web sites, books, and materials on portfolio development and management continues to expand rapidly.

The portfolio not only offers a tool for authentic assessment but also a means for students to be reflective practitioners, emphasizing the how and why as much as the what. Time spent in portfolio assessment is not time taken away from teach-

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